

Rio's Post-Olympics Politics Are Less Than Divine

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Seat of the Portuguese empire, cradle of samba, city of the Summer Olympics: Rio de Janeiro has been home to many splendors, most of which have enriched Brazil's multicultural heritage.

So how to explain the 2016 municipal elections?

This Sunday, the Cariocas -- as Rio's natives call themselves -- hit the polls to elect a new mayor. Marcelo Crivella, a Brazilian senator and former preacher, handily won the contest with 60 percent of the votes against hard-line socialist Marcelo Freixo, who drew 40 percent. And what might have been a time of democratic renewal for this stylish, if mistreated, Brazilian city now feels more like a culture war, fueled by competing dogmas that share little beyond their enthusiasm for exotic ideas and mutual derision.

Start with the fact that the runoff was between two figures from Brazil's political fringe. Crivella parlayed his success on the pulpit and a treacly gospel singer's voice into a seat in the Brazilian senate. Critics questioned his ties to [Edir Macedo](#), his uncle and the billionaire founder of the hugely popular and [somewhat shady](#) Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. But apparently voters felt safer with Crivella than his opponent Marcelo Freixo, a Rio state lawmaker, who represents the small, very left-wing Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), whose members have [burned the Israeli flag](#) in public and [praised](#) the dysfunctional ersatz socialism of Venezuela.

Both candidates had fashioned themselves as anti-politicians in the first round of voting to beat out a crowded field of contenders from Brazil's more established parties. Their success in one of Latin America's biggest and most sophisticated cities is yet more evidence that growing public revulsion at the governing class can also open the door to adventurers and political obscurantism.

Clashing views are hardly a surprise in Brazil, where a massive political corruption scandal that climaxed in a nasty impeachment battle has left society polarized. But for a moment Rio, led by an ambitious mayor who made some bold urban reforms and delivered a [successful 2016 Olympics](#), seemed to rise above the national funk. In fact, according to [Marcelo Neri](#), an economist at the Getulio Vargas Foundation in Rio, while Brazil's economy has fallen into a deep recession, the city of Rio has held its own: Household income rose 7.4 percent in the 12 months to June 2016, even as it fell 5.6 percent nationwide. As [Neri](#) told me, "To listen to the candidates, Rio is a catastrophe, but our numbers show the opposite."

What's been a flop in Rio is the politics. Outgoing two-term mayor Eduardo Paes backed an inept candidate whose administrative skills were overshadowed by accusations that he'd abused his wife (she later dropped the charges). More broadly, the Rio vote was part of a national backlash against Paes's party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement, many of whose chieftains (notably the [jailed congressional house speaker and Carioca Eduardo Cunha](#)) had been caught with their hand in the public till. "All over Brazil, anti-politics are on the rise," said Mauro Paulino, head of pollster Datafolha.

And so the race for Rio came down to a contest between political outliers who, startled to be in the spotlight, appeared to be making up their proposals as they go. Freixo walked back his [original statist program](#) of big bureaucracy to embrace [downsizing, reassessing taxes, and reassigning outside workers](#). If once Crivella claimed that [homosexuality is a sin](#) and accused Catholics and followers of Afro-Brazilian religions of "preaching demonic doctrines," he recently [apologized](#) for his "immature" attitude and swore he'd become a paragon of tolerance, even as he ducked debates and avoided news media.

The good news, at least, is that the candidates grok that winning elections these days requires a shift to center

ground. Voters, especially the middle class, want a change of management, not a rupture.

But it also means that politics has become a battle of souls. Once Brazil was a Roman Catholic monopoly; now evangelical Protestants represent nearly four out of every 10 worshipers, according to a [Pew Research Center survey](#). Tellingly, the survey also found that Brazil's Protestants are three times more likely than Catholics to share their faith with others, and that young Protestants are more devout than their Catholic peers.

Crivella, a devotee of Pentecostalism -- an aggressive and dramatic form of Christian evangelicalism -- is the fold's first big-city mayor. Throughout the campaign, he [polled](#) best in Protestant strongholds (with 72 percent of the vote) and among older, poor, and less educated voters.

His strength provoked some unlikely eleventh-hour alliances, starting with the group of Catholic priests who [declared their support for the socialist Freixo](#). They were promptly censured by Rio archbishop Orani Tempesta, who weeks before also had reprimanded Crivella's campaign for using the [prelate's photograph](#) in a campaign pamphlet. Instead of trying to invoke divine intervention, Rio's political class ought to listen to their constituents, a record 45 percent of whom either spoiled their votes (20 percent) or simply declined to show up at the polls.

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To contact the author of this story:

Mac Margolis at mmargolis14@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor responsible for this story:

James Gibney at jgibney5@bloomberg.net